

Clashes spoil

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for voters and they were able to get to the polling centres peacefully and without intimidation.

National Election Observation Council said its mobile observers across the country recorded low turnout of voters and higher presence of the ruling party activists at the polling stations.

It also observed that there was less enthusiasm among the voters in casting votes and it opined that the conduct of upazila election within an interval of 23 days after the parliamentary polls reduced the significance of the latter in the public eyes.

Bangladesh Human Rights Commission's report said 50 percent voters have exercised their rights to franchise in the upazila election.

The upazila election was held through various irregularities including clashes and violence among the rival

workers and supporters of the candidates.

Taking control of vote centres, casting false votes and vote riggings marred the smooth and peaceful election environment, it said.

It said casting votes at some polling centres was suspended due to influences of the ruling party men. There was no spontaneous and festive mood in the election, it added.

Brotee said in a press release that the low turnout in upazila polls frustrated the successful holding of December 29 parliamentary elections.

It opines that from 55 to 60 percent voters have cast their votes in the election.

It attributed low turnout to some factors: the season of Boro plantation, After the thumping victory AL-led grand alliance gave less importance to this election and two polls were held within a short span of time.

Upazila polls

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malpractices under political governments, he said, "We must not let it continue. If necessary, we'll sit with the government and political parties and discuss how to put an end to it."

Mentioning widespread abuse of power in local body polls in the past, he said they thought some changes were taking place.

"We didn't expect those in power to misuse their office and influence the administration," Huda said in reference to the lawmakers who had canvassed for their party-backed candidates.

The December 29 parliamentary election, which was praised at home and abroad for its fairness, saw a record 87 percent turnout.

In August last year, elections to four city corporations and nine municipalities under the caretaker government too had a healthy attendance.

The free and fair conduct of those polls is widely credited to a flawless voter list and peaceful atmosphere.

With two successful elections under its belt, the EC had expected a high turnout in the upazila elections as well.

But the way things turned out yesterday seems to have confirmed its fears about the credibility of polls under a political government.

Originally, the commission scheduled the local polls to precede the parliamentary election as it sought to avert the polls being influenced by the ruling party or alliance.

It however had to give in to mounting pressure from the major political parties including AL and BNP, and rescheduled the elections for January 22.

Queried what possibly led to low turnout, the CEC said they are not sure if it was a lack of interest among the voters or intimidation.

"We expected people would show up in large numbers to register their will. This is something always desired in a democratic polity."

"We took all-out preparations to ensure their participation in the elections. But that didn't happen and that's

Shakib

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international against Zimbabwe as the first Bangladeshi cricketer to have achieved that mark.

With the series locked 1-1, Zimbabwe -- still trying to regroup and revive their Test status they put on hold years ago -- have nothing to lose against the series favourites home side.

Not only for the sake of the series, the Tigers also need to win this match to stay level with the lower-ranked Africans, who have already won two out of their three matches against them including one in the triangular series also involving Sri Lanka.

Bangladesh have had ups and downs in the series but a holiday crowd will look to their favourite cricketers to seal the series convincingly after a six-wicket win in the second match on Wednesday that cancelled the tourists' lead following a two-wicket victory in the opener.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh have decided to retain the same side from the previous game.

The match will be telecast live by Bangladesh Television from 9am.

why I'm disappointed," said Huda.

He said they would look into the reasons why the turnout was low despite no major reports of violence.

"That the elections have taken place after 18 years is however a turning point," he added.

Election Commissioner Sakhawati said it rests with the government to see whether the elections are acceptable with such a low voter attendance.

He however said the voter turnout might be around 50 percent, which was more or less the case in the previous upazila polls.

"I can at best term today's elections fair, but cannot say they were free. Voters didn't seem to be free to be at the polling stations," Sakhawati continued.

Asked why he thinks the elections were not free, he said it was because the "government had a stake."

He said there was no negligence on part of the EC, and the environment too was 'first-class'.

About the local body polls being prone to political influence, the election commissioner said since they could not be held in a non-partisan manner, they should be made partisan like the parliamentary election.

Asked if he is satisfied, Sakhawati said, "Personally, I'm not happy at all."

People

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prime minister Khaleda Zia's parliamentary affairs adviser Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, Jamaat leaders Delwar Hossain Saidee, Mohammad Qamaruzzaman and Abdul Kader Mollah.

After yesterday's hearing, Judge Iftekar Ahmed of the Ninth Assistant Judge's Court directed the plaintiffs to publish an advertisement in two national Bangla dailies asking interested people or institutions to be parties to contest the case for public interest.

The court also directed the plaintiffs to submit the copy of the advertisement to it on February 18.

The chief election commissioner, Election Commission secretary and deputy commissioner (DC) of Dhaka have also been made pro-forma defendants in the case.

In their petition the plaintiffs said no war criminals are permitted to form any political party and they are also disqualified from participating in any elections in the country.

The plaintiffs mentioned that Golam Azam and 35 others were identified as war criminals soon after the Liberation War but are yet to be brought under trial.

During the Liberation War, Golam Azam, Nizami, Mojahid and others formed local militia groups Al-Badar, Al-Shams and Razakars, which were involved in killing around 30 lakh people and violating over three lakh women.

These anti-Liberation War forces also killed a large number of intellectuals on November 14, 1971, the three lawyers stated in their complaint.

Earlier on November 5 last year, the Sector Commanders Forum also published a list of 50 war criminals.

47 BTCL staff

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budget allocation and they did it without any legal authority in the period between 2000-2001 and 2007-2008 by abusing power.

ACC yesterday also approved filing of a charge sheet against nine BTCL officials including its director Mohammad Toufique on charges of concealing information about wealth worth Tk 3.89 crore and amassing wealth worth Tk 3.99 crore beyond known sources of income.

Besides, ACC investigation found employees of BTCL embezzled about Tk 41.38 crore between 2000-01 and 2007-08 in the name of providing telephone connection, repair costs and maintenance of telecommunication sector.

A taskforce of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) launched a probe and found that employees of the BTCL indulged in rampant corruption.

The team also found that employees misappropriated the money by showing employment of fake labourers, producing fake bills, vouchers and documents.

ACC Director General (Admin) Col Hanif Iqbal revealed the ACC findings at a press briefing at the ACC headquarters yesterday.

The 47 include five former directors, 11 senior accountants, seven assistant directors, 21 junior accountants, and three cashiers.

All the officials are from Revenue-1 and Revenue-2 offices of the BTCL.

BNP alleges

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drove out opposition agents from those centers, and barred voters from casting votes.

The party also alleged that administration did not work neutrally; in many places complaints against ruling party activists who went on rampage were unheard by police; rather law enforcers harassed the opposition activists.

BNP office secretary Rizvi Ahmed brought the allegations of irregularities at a press conference held at party chairperson's Gulshan office at 4:30pm.

"We have put forward some of the information before the media we have received so far from across the country and we will update you later," Rizvi Ahmed told reporter when asked whether they will accept the poll result or not.

Rizvi claimed that they had documents of massive irregularities in the upazila polls.

He said Jhenaidah, Munshiganj, Chougacha in Jessore, Magura, Feni, Ramganj in Laxmipur, Mirshorai in Chittagong are among some of those areas where massive irregularities were detected.

AL promised it would nurture democratic approach but they have snatched ballot papers after taking control of the centers. They have reneged on their electoral pledges and the opposition was non-existent during the polls, he added.

"We are witnessing a semi-BAKSAL style and the ruling party went through a trial procedure of it in the local body polls yesterday," Rizvi said.

Vote almost

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Taj while briefing newsmen after a meeting at his ministry at about 5:00pm yesterday.

About the involvement of ruling party men in breaking laws in some polling centres during the elections, he said no one is above the law and added that legal action will be taken against them.

Responding to another query, he said a directive has been given to the law enforcement agencies for taking immediate measures in case of any violation of laws.

"We have given directives to the law enforcement agencies to maintain law and order as per the directives of the Election Commission," he said and added that they didn't receive any news of mentionable incident took place centering the upazila polls until 5:00pm.

Earlier in the morning, US Ambassador James F Moriarty met Home Minister Sahara Khatun and State Minister Sohail Taj at their secretariat office.

Talking to reporters after the meeting, the US ambassador assured that his government would continue its supports to the home ministry.

Sohail Taj said the ongoing activities and cooperation between the home ministry and the US government would continue and added that the present government seeks supports from the friendly countries in implementing its election pledges to make a digital Bangladesh by 2021.

Ghosts of past return

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of ballot papers in Madarganj upazila of Jamalpur last evening.

Twenty people were hurt during clashes between supporters of rival candidates of Ukha upazila in Cox's Bazar. Officer-in-charge of Ukha Police Station filed a case accusing 500 unknown people.

In Teknaf upazila Awami League (AL) lawmaker Abdul Rahman allegedly assaulted three election officials, presiding officer and two assistant presiding officers, in two polling centres.

An allegation was raised against Fisheries and Livestock Minister Abdul Latif Biswas for working in favour of Awami League (AL) adherent candidate in Belkuchi upazila and AL supporters allegedly forced voters to cast their votes openly and tried to capture polling centres. The AL supporters also vandalised a vehicle of the United Nations.

Chairman candidate of Faridpur Sadar upazila Imran Hossain Chowdhury, 63, a Jatiya Party leader and former upazila parishad chairman, died of heart attack yesterday.

An executive judicial magistrate in an instant judgment sentenced a Jamaat supporter to two years' rigorous imprisonment for casting fake votes for Jamaat adherent candidate Maulana Tamim Uddin Ahmed at Islampur Govt Primary School polling centre in Khulna.

In Araiha upazila of Narayanganj, police arrested an assistant presiding officer and two polling officers when they were casting votes for AL adherent chairman candidate Shah Lalal. The arrestees are assistant presiding officer Azufa Akter and polling officers Iqbal Hossain and Abdul Mannan. Police recovered 90 ballot papers from their possession.

Locals chased two AL activists-Sayed and Mamun--as they were trying to get away with ballot boxes. They managed to flee leaving the ballot boxes behind. The AL men attacked a polling centre and left Assistant Presiding Officer Harunur Rashid injured.

Reports of ballot box hijacking and assaulting assistant presiding officers also came from Munshiganj.

Three people including an assistant presiding officer were arrested at Bhairabpur Govt Primary School centre in Naogaon's Raminagar upazila in connection with violating the electoral code of conduct and threatening the presiding officer. One of the two arrestees is polling agent of BNP adherent chairman candidate SM Al Faruk James.

Eight followers of AL lawmaker Kazi Abdul Wadud Dara in Puthia, Rajshahi, were arrested for taking over three polling booths in Hatina Non-Government Primary School polling centre.

A chairman and three vice-chairmen candidates in Noakhali said they have 'with-drawn' from the race alleging beating up of their polling agents. They are four-party-backed Companganj chairman candidate Fakhrul Islam, vice-chairman candidate Jahir Uddin and female vice-chairman candidate Taslima Toha Lipi.

Voting was suspended in two polling centres following snatching of ballot papers in Noakhali. At least 50 people were injured in clashes between the supporters of rival candidates in different polling centres there.

Police arrested eight people in connection with intimidating voters and other criminal activities around polling centres in the district.

At least 20 people were injured in Kushtia's Daulatpur upazila when supporters of two pro-AL chairman candidates and two pro-AL vice-chairman candidates clashed with each other in two separate incidents. Police arrested 10 people at Daulatpur and Kumarkhali while they were casting votes openly for AL adherent chairman candidates.

In Bogra, Presiding Officer Rajat Kumar Das and Assistant Presiding Officer Harun-or-Rashid of Nishindara Fakir Uddin School and College polling centre were suspended for working in favour of AL adherent chairman candidate in the Sadar upazila. Presiding Officer Zulfikar Ali and Assistant Presiding Officer Golam Hossain of Manikchar Primary School polling centre were also suspended for working in favour of Jamaat adherent candidate Bazul Rahman.

Two polling agents and two law enforcers were injured in a clash between supporters of two pro-AL candidates in Bera upazila of Pabna.

Supporters of chairman candidate Azizul Huq Arju vandalised the car of rival candidate Afzal Hossain. They also attacked police leaving Bera police chief and a sub-inspector injured. Army and Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) personnel later arrested two polling agents of Azizul Huq.

A mobile court yesterday sentenced five supporters of AL-backed chairman candidate Shahin Ahmed of Keraniganj upazila to three years' imprisonment for trying to take away 29 ballot papers at New Baker Char Primary School polling centre, UNB reports. They were also fined Tk 4,000 each.

Nilphamari municipality panel Chairman Shamsul Islam was arrested for violating the electoral rules.

At least seven people were injured when supporters of two chairman candidates locked in clashes in Hanipur--West Chargazipur and Nauri polling centres of Matlab (north) upazila under Chandpur district. Voting was suspended at a polling centre in Faridganj after criminals cast 200 fake votes.

In Barisal, police fired six bullets when supporters of an AL adherent candidate were trying to take over Pashchim Ratanpur Government Primary School polling centre in Mehendiganj.

A polling agent of candidate Monirul Islam Chhobi was suspended from the Kornokathi Gaucha Rahmania High School polling centre in Barisal for trying to get voters to cast their votes for his candidate, Presiding Officer Mosharaf Hossain said.

Polling at three centres of Nandail upazila in Mymensingh district was postponed following incidents of ballot box snatching.

Five ballot boxes were snatched, two each from Sherpur Uttar Govt Primary School and Ahmedabad Govt Primary School polling centres and one from Imam Hossain High School centre, said Assistant Returning Officer, also upazila nirbahi officer of Nandail, Hawlader Rakibul Bari.

Police arrested Abdul Mannan alias Mannaf in connection with the snatching. The boxes could not be recovered as of filing of this report at 10:00pm.

An executive judicial magistrate sentenced a man to six months imprisonment for influencing voters in Gaibandha.

Police arrested Sardar Murshid for voting in an open area at Rampal upazila in Bagerhat. When asked, Murshid told reporters that he was forced to cast his vote openly by one of the candidates in the race.

UNB reports: One person was arrested in possession of a firearm and voting at a polling centre was suspended in Gazaria upazila in Munshiganj.

BNP adherent chairman candidate of Pangsha upazila in Rajbari Ashrafur Islam Miah alleged that supporters of his rival AL adherent candidate Hasan Ali Biswas captured around 40 polling centres in eight unions. He demanded postponement of the polls in that upazila.

Police also held a person with Tk 35,000 in connection with trying to buy votes in Khayerpur union under Phulbari upazila of Dinajpur.

An executive judicial magistrate sentenced two people to six months' imprisonment in Patuakhali for threatening voters at a polling centre. The magistrate also fined them Tk 1,000 each.

Presiding officer of Pathan Tola Govt Primary School polling centre, in Sherpur upazila of Bogra, Amirul Islam was beaten up twice in the polling centre allegedly by Jamaat activists, Assistant Returning Officer Zakir Hossain said.

Ballot boxes and result sheets of three polling centres at Atpara upazila in Netrakona were looted by criminals around 10:00pm. The three centres are Tonda, Ransiddah and Baratali.

Polls suspended

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Voting for the upazilas of Belkuchi in Sirajganj, Barura in Comilla, Ramganj in Laxmipur and Brahmanbaria Sadar were suspended after the polling began while polls to Ukha upazila in Cox's Bazar was postponed Wednesday night following the massive violence in the area.

Earlier, the EC postponed the election to Dighinala upazila of Khagrachhari following abduction of a contender.

Finally, 479 upazilas out of 481 went to the polls yesterday morning.

Election Commission (EC) has suspended polling to the upazilas and centres for the reports of capturing polling stations, driving out polling agents, stuffing ballot papers, irregularities and political influence. Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) ATM Shamsul Huda yesterday said to reporters.

He said EC finally suspended elections to those upazilas and polling centres after cross checking the allegations of irregularities.

The EC Secretariat till 10:15pm could not confirm the accurate number of polling stations where the voting has been suspended. Officials at the EC Secretariat, however, estimated that the number might be 50 to 70.

Separate wage

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An eight-member UGC delegation, led by its Chairman Prof Nazrul Islam, handed over the annual report to the president at Bangabhaban.

The report proposes a new name of the commission to be renamed as the 'Higher Education Commission' comparing other countries of South Asia Association for Regional Corporation (Saarc). It also suggests that the government should form a separate accreditation council for ensuring quality education in the country's public and private universities.

President Iajuddin Ahmed stressed the need for strengthening the monitoring capacity of the commission to help improve the quality of higher education in the country.

During the meeting, the UGC Chairman thanked the president for approving separate fund for UGC to carry out researches and to offer scholarships for doing PhD and M Phil degrees in the country's universities.

There are 32 public and 54 private universities in the country, it says.

The delegation members include Prof Ehsanul Huq, Prof M Abdul Hakim, Prof M Tajul Islam, Prof Amena Begum and Prof Atul Hai Shibbi.

Hasina seeks

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King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz on her assumption of the office of prime minister.

The PM expressed her thanks to the Saudi King for his congratulation and extended an invitation to him for visiting Bangladesh.

The Saudi envoy assured that Saudi Arabia would 'gradually' increase development assistance to Bangladesh and recruit more manpower from the country.

During the discussion, the prime minister laid emphasis on establishing peace in the Middle Eastern countries as well as across the world for prosperity of all mankind.

They also discussed various issues of mutual interests and hoped that the existing friendly relations between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia would be strengthened further in the days to come.

Later, a three-member delegation of Prince Aga Khan Shia Ismaili Council of Bangladesh led by its president Habib Hirji paid a courtesy call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Habib Hirji formally handed over a felicitation letter from Prince Aga Khan, Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, to Sheikh Hasina on her assumption of the office of Prime Minister.

The delegation apprised the PM of their various development projects in Bangladesh including the proposed Aga Khan Academy and Ismaili Jamayat Khana.

The PM was also informed that Prince Aga Khan has expressed his willingness to build more educational institutions in Bangladesh.

The Prime Minister inquired about the wellbeing of members of the Shia Ismaili community living in Bangladesh.

Secretary to the PMO Kazi Aminul Islam and Press Secretary to the Prime Minister Abul Kalam Azad were present on the occasion.

Fear factor

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the election, less awareness among voters about the polls and holding it only three weeks after the parliamentary elections also contributed to low turnout, said voters, election observers and officials while talking to The Daily Star.

Officials involved in the election process assumed that about 50 to 60 percent votes had been cast in the upazila polls from 8:00am to 4:00pm.

The upazila polls were held only three weeks after the ninth parliamentary elections on December 29 last year that witnessed a turnout of 87 percent voters.

Voter turnout was poor in most polling centres in the morning and got momentum after 2:00pm, election officials said.

About 20 to 30 percent votes were cast in most polling centres across the country by 12:00noon. Vote casting went up to 40 to 50 percent by 3:00pm and reached 60 percent in the end, presiding officers and election officials said.

In many areas, a large number of voters panicked following violent incidents involving followers of the candidates.

There were allegations that the supporters of Awami League-backed candidates barred voters from going to the polling centres in several districts.

The turnout of female voters was not satisfactory in many districts in the yesterday's polls compared to the recently held parliamentary elections.

Many young voters also refrained from casting votes in the upazila election.

AL men win

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upazilas available till 1:30am show pro-AL candidates won in 34 upazilas, pro-BNP candidates in 11, pro-Jatiya Party (JP) men in four and pro-Jamaat men won five upazilas.

Besides, five candidates of other parties won the upazila chairmanship.

In Khulna, pro-AL candidates Moral Rashiduzzaman in Paikgachha upazila, GM Mohsin Reza in Koira, Gazi Abdul Hadi in Dumuria, Ashrafur Alam Khan in Batia Gata, Mollik Mohiuddin in Digholia, Sheikh Ali Akbar in Rupsha, Shorfuiddin Biswas in Terokhada, Abul Hossain in Dakop and pro-BNP candidate Sarkar Alauddin Mithu in Phultala came out victorious in the upazila chairman post.

In Satkhira, pro-AL candidates Golam Mostafa won in Debata, ABM Mustakim in Ashashuni, Ghosh Sanad Kumar in Tala, BM Nazrul Islam in Kalaura and pro-Jamaat candidate Abdul Bari won in Shannagar and independent Shahadat Hossain in Kaliganj.

In Faridpur, pro-AL candidates Mosharraf Hossain Mollah won in Boalmari, Mofizur Rahman in Madhukhali, Moniruzzaman in Nagarkanda, Khan Belayet Hossain in Alfadanga, and pro-JP candidate Abul Hossain Master won in Charbhadrashan and pro-Communist Party of Bangladesh candidate Sudhin Sarkar Mandal won in Mangal.

In Rangpur, pro-AL candidates Anwarul Islam Maya won in Kaunia, Mojibur Rahman Pramanik in Gangachara, Shibnath Sarkar Mithu in Badargachha, Zakir Hossain in Mithapukur while pro-JP candidates Mustafizur Rahman won in Rangpur Sadar and Mahbuba Rahman in Pirgachha.

In Rajshahi, pro-AL candidates AKM Ataur Rahman won in Godagari and Abdul Mazid in Durgapur, pro-BNP candidates Imran Ali Mollah won in Tanore, Shamimul Islam in Mohanpur, Ziaur Rahman in Baghmara, Wazidul Islam in Puthia, Abu Sayeed Chad in Charchat and Baizul Islam Khan in Bagha and pro-Jamaat candidate Makbul Hossain won in Poba.

In Chittagong, pro-AL candidates Aftab Ahmed Chowdhury won in Fatikchhari and Mohammad Shahjahan in Sandeep.

In Pabna, pro-AL candidates Ahmed Firoz Kabir won in Sandeep.

Tight security

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Juma prayers today centring the appointment of new Khatib.

"We will have enhanced security arrangements there. Each person entering the mosque will be searched," DMP Commissioner Naim Ahmed said when contacted last night.

Earlier, the Islamic Foundation had asked the home ministry, DMP and Paltan police to ensure security of devotees and the Khatib at the time of Juma prayers.

Sources said plainclothes security personnel will also be deployed at the mosque to detect trouble-makers, if any.

Police and intelligence agencies are keeping watch on five kawmi madrasas on information that students from those might create trouble at the mosque today. "Students from these madrasas are suspected to have been involved in last Friday's unpleasant incident there," said an intelligence official.

Meanwhile, newly appointed director general of Islamic Foundation Shamim Afzal at a meeting with officials yesterday discussed the situation following appointment of Mohammad Salauddin as new Khatib and asked all to remain alert during today's Juma prayers.

Unpleasant incidents took place at the national mosque centring its new Khatib reportedly because the post is very attractive due to the perks and other benefits provided by the government.

Dhaka tipped

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"The amount of money to be available from the fund depends on what type of projects we present for the fund," he said.

The US ambassador said, "Eligibility for getting MCA fund is assessed every year and it will be assessed at the end of this year. The US and Bangladesh will be working together now for improving the conditions which will enable Bangladesh to be included in the fund."

On TIFA, Moriarty said Washington has already taken up the issue for discussion and expressed hope to go forward with it.

Meanwhile, a delegation of Local Consultative Group, an organisation of development partners working in Bangladesh, met with Finance Minister Muthith at his Secretariat office yesterday. After the meeting